



It's All Good

Everything is either wisdom or a distortion of wisdom, says **Anne Carolyn Klein**.

Once we see this, we can relax and allow the path
to dissolve the disturbed energies that give rise to our habitual reactions.

The Sufi sage Rumi brings us a famous story-poem of adultery and wisdom. He describes a jealous wife who is so careful that, for seven years, her husband is never alone with their attractive maid. Then one day while out with her maid at the public baths, she discovers she has left her silver washbasin at home and sends the maid to fetch it. The maid eagerly runs to her task. No sooner is she gone than the wife realizes what is at stake and races home herself. Rumi sums up the narrative, saying:

*The maid ran for love
The wife ran out of fear
And jealousy.
There is a great difference.
The mystic flies from moment to moment
The fearful ascetic drags along month
to month.
You can't understand this with your mind.
You must burst open!*

— *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks
and John Moyne

Rumi takes the occasion to contrast the burning love of the maid with the fear-based motivation of the wife. We can understand that he is describing two different qualities, or energies, of attention and intention. He is suggesting that for our spiritual work to be effective, we must plunge ahead, burning with love and longing, not burdened with fear and jealousy. Our love for the path is the only force that can counter the power of the patterns we inevitably bump up against as we practice. These are the patterns that mold our lives. But we don't generally care to look at them. We underestimate their importance. We don't love them and we don't fully understand that they are not only the gateway to what we love, but the actual fabric of it.

Not recognizing this, we sometimes feel that the thing we call "practice" is more important than the thing we call "daily life" or "our stuff." But this is just another way of expressing the dualism that is our greatest error. It is precisely this false bifurcation that keeps us from flying whole. The flight of the sage, as Buddhist paths understand this, is not a flight from the days of our lives to the nights of our realization; it is a passionately open encounter that encompasses all.

To support this possibility in ourselves it is helpful to have an all-encompassing language, to recognize ways of expression that, like love, are inclusive, not dualistic or divisive. The language of jealousy is the language of calculation and logic; it is reason at its most impoverished, a zero-sum game. "If she has more, I have less." "If I see my afflictions, I won't see the path." Such concepts make meaning through separation and distinction. When we describe a particular object of attention, such as breath or a specific image, we also make such distinctions. But when we look at the feel of attention in the body, we see that the energy supporting attention can indeed be encompassing, acknowledging both the obstacles and the potential to remove them.

For example, in learning to focus on our breath, we can't help but notice how our attention gets deflected. Sometimes we scatter to other objects, sometimes emotion overtakes us, sometimes we go dull, sometimes we daydream. If we attend to our sensations while our mind is moving in these ways, we can experience all of these events as movements of our own energy. Asian culture in general and Buddhist traditions in particular picture the mind as riding a wind-horse, a steed of wind or energy, or *lungta*. When mind moves to an object, it is our energy that takes it there. When our mind is still, the energies throughout our body are settling down. So it is

Our wisdom and our defilements, our path and our everyday life, are not different things. Our attention need not be split. Our energy never is.

important to understand that our meditation is a whole-body practice, engaging all the energies that support our minds and its habitual patterns of movement. When we train attention, we are training that windhorse to become more stable and less reactive. This is not an intellectual matter, even though an intellectual understanding of impermanence, patience, or the benefits of serenity, for example, can support our development. More fundamentally, we are training the energies on which our habitual mind rides.

The language of energy is like the language of love—inclusive and encompassing. Unlike the process of thinking, it does not make meaning through separation and distinction, but through intimate connection. Recognizing how energy participates in our every interaction helps us understand how a path aimed at liberation that is based on qualities of wisdom and compassion also encompasses the things that obstruct these qualities. This is the logos of energy, not the logic of concepts or reasoning. It is also the logos of reality itself. After all, the dharmakaya, the real nature of things, is everywhere. Everything participates in it, good and bad alike. In this regard its dynamic is very similar to the dynamic, or logos, of energy. Palpably sensing how this energy participates in everything we do helps us touch the endless embrace that is reality. Failing to access this dimension in a personal way means practice can't help but reinforce our obstructing dualism.

"The stink of Zen" refers to a particular type of dualism, namely our tendency to look down with scorn at those we find less spiritual. Usually,

however, these turn out to be people who are exhibiting exactly the tendencies we are trying to squelch in ourselves. When Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche first taught the foundational practices, or *ngondro*, to American students at the University of Virginia in 1974, he told us that doing these practices intensely could "speed up our karma" and bring on unwanted states, even illness. This was a kindly and potent introduction to the dynamics of the path. He was letting us know that so long as there is anything left to stir, paths of practice will stir them. It is like taking a whirling whisk to a floor. The floor might have seemed clean enough before we started sweeping, then the air gets so thick with dust we can hardly breathe. This means our sweeping is effective. We don't say, "Oh now the room is dusty, I should stop. I'll take the broom to another room where it's already clean."

Yet when it comes to practice, we often do just that. We find ourselves in resistance to seeing the dust, the habitual patterns we need to be scrutinizing and understanding so we can really get free of them. We may even think it's skillful not to pay attention to such things. Not understanding the inclusive nature of our own energetic sensibility, we fear that acknowledging our jealousies and attachments will somehow obstruct our goal of liberation. But that's just our deluded dualism talking. The broom must make contact with the dust, the path must make contact with our negativities. Otherwise practice is as meaningless as sweeping what is already immaculate. Luckily, the path is designed to bring this misconstrued duality to light, if we let it. This message is actually there at every level of the teachings.

The Fifth Dalai Lama advises us not to look for emptiness beyond the mountain because it is right here. Buddhist tantras teach that our afflictions are wisdom in disguise. Dzogchen teaches that the actual nature of everything, including our unwholesome patterns, is primordial purity.



ANNE CAROLYN KLEIN (Rigzin Drolma) is cofounder of Dawn Mountain Tibetan Temple, Community Center, and Research Institute in Houston, Texas. She is also a professor of religious studies at Houston's Rice University and the author of *Heart Essence of the Great Expanse: A Story of Transmission*. Her forthcoming book, *Strand of Jewels*, is a distillation of Dzogchen teachings by Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche.

These are not abstract philosophical statements. They tell us that our wisdom and our defilements, our path and our everyday life, are not different things. Our attention need not be split. Our energy never is. The path expresses itself in part as openness, receptivity, and continuity. These energetic holdings are different than our usual ones, and more conducive to unfolding optimally.

Ordinary energy will fuel our patterns if we do not recognize the energetic conversation, the interwoven dynamic, between them and our path. Such palpable recognitions gradually allow the path energies, which are not materially different from the ordinary ones, to reshape or dissolve our patterns. Water is already present in ice, we just can't drink it in that form. Our wisdom is already present in ignorant patterns, we just can't recognize it until the obscuring patterns dissolve. But their energy is always there. Everything is either wisdom or a distortion of wisdom. Once we see this, we can relax enough to let the path lead us to the disturbed energies of our habitual ways of reacting. Then we can dissolve them.

Practically speaking, it takes quite a bit of maturity and commitment to sweep where the dust is. But the path isn't functioning unless we do. And it's helpful to recognize that the path functions in two distinct, mutually complementary and absolutely necessary ways.

On the one hand, the more access we have to wisdom, nonduality, and compassion, the more our patterns begin to dissolve. So sometimes we emphasize cultivating those enlightened qualities. Fueled by our love for these qualities, we meditate on impermanence and emptiness, we do foundational practices, we cultivate the giving-and-taking by practicing *tonglen*. We cultivate love, equanimity, and wisdom. On the other hand, our dualistically based patterns prevent us from experiencing these qualities right now. So we also practice to recognize, feel into, and slowly thin out these patterns. (Ken McLeod's detailing of this process in *Wake Up to Your Life* is an outstanding example of how to work with this on the path.) In this way we become aware enough of our anger to dissolve it, we notice how our minds create the six realms right in this life,

we feel into the distasteful energies of our hungry ghost envy or sense of inadequacy, our godlike pride, our animal dullness, and so on. Especially for those of us active in the world, those of us who don't sit in solitary retreat for months or years, it is essential that we work the path in both of these ways.

Gautama Buddha said so too. From the very first discourse on the four ennobling truths, Buddha made it clear that we practitioners must carefully and experientially identify our suffering and its causes down to their most subtle manifestation. Only then are we ready to cultivate the causes of its cessation.

The wholeness of the path is evident in traditional presentations of the four ennobling truths. The first truth includes everything that is or could be unsatisfactory and painful, including the habits that bind us. Not only do we see that it is painful, but that these experiences are impermanent, empty, and selfless. Together, the first and second describe our current condition, and what we can realize to be free from it. Right from the first, Buddha showed that these are not separate. Similarly, if we consider all four ennobling truths, the first pair, suffering and its causes, describes the process of samsara. The second pair, suffering's cessations and the path to that state, describes the process of nirvana. Nirvana comes only through seeing what goes on in samsara.

In this way we see that the path, like energetic sensibility, is a wholeness. It is not a dualistic emphasis on nirvana to the exclusion of samsara. Whether we speak of the path's emphasis on nirvana, liberation, buddhanature, or emptiness, all these terms are ways of naming what we really are. And our love for what we really are, our most intimate possible knowing, gives us the power and confidence to, as Rumi put it, "burst open"—to acknowledge and feel all the elements, however miserable, now operating in our lives. Then the path becomes real. And we realize our all-encompassing love for it. Like sunshine on ice, love melts away self-holding, and our patterns along with it. Having melted, the water flows and then evaporates. Our inner radiance remains, ready to share warmth with everyone. **BD**